

L2 writing material: How to cultivate compare and contrast genre skills using a narrative essay

Saurabh Anand

The following teaching artifact aims to guide second language writing teachers to help their college-level multilingual writers understand the compare and contrast genre via a narrative essay. The teaching artifact provides step-by-step scaffoldings and opportunities for multilingual students to establish personal connections while developing an understanding of the target genre. The activity will help students identify specific pieces of the life experiences of characters in the sample literary source, compare and contrast those aspects with their own lives, and guide them to identify the target writing genre.

Keywords: second language writing, multilingual composition, narrative writing

Conventional methods to teach second language (L2) writing and other academic writing genres usually include discussing assignment sheets and sharing examples of previous student papers with current students before they write their essays. However, compare and contrast essays are challenging for our multilingual writers because they often cannot relate to situations reflected in prior student writings or examples mentioned in conventional teaching materials. This challenge can be because of the differences in cultural practices, traditions, and educational contexts. Therefore, if we as knowledge facilitators intentionally and creatively choose teaching materials and texts such as narrative literary essays to teach the compare and contrast genre, we provide our L2 writers an opportunity to establish personal connections while practicing the genre itself. Narrative literary text can help increase student motivation and encourage them to develop their writing skills by connecting and interacting with the characters of the literary text.

This article describes an opportunity I provided to my students in 2019 in the capacity of a graduate teaching assistant, who are usually a combination of international students and second-generation immigrant students, in my English composition classroom for multilingual writing at a Midwestern university. In the class, I approached the academic concept of compare and contrast by first asking students to find similarities and differences between themselves and a character in a narrative essay. This laid the groundwork for later teaching how to write a compare and contrast essay in the academic capacity. It is noteworthy to mention that some students might already know what a compare and contrast essay is. However, this activity will allow students who already know the genre to revisit and also to help their fellow students new to this genre learn about the conventions of a compare and contrast genre, which will also benefit community building (Hyland, 2012). This article maps out the steps I used to form a foundation prior to starting instruction on compare and contrast academic essay structure.

I include the following language scaffoldings: a list of response questions, a Venn diagram, and a mini writing activity to support students' understanding of the target genre. In the following paragraphs, I will explain what this teaching material includes, how it connects to L2 literacy development via writing, and what decisions I made while designing this activity with connections to TESOL/Applied Linguistics scholarship.

Literature review

Often while teaching different academic essay genres in our L2 classrooms, we find ourselves focusing on teaching a variety of writing styles rather than teaching register variations within each style, perhaps to meet course objectives. Scholars such as Pennycook (2010) and Canagarajah (2013) emphasize that register fluidity within the English language across contexts, especially genre, is one of the determinants of authentic target language use. One of the ways in which teachers can translate this into practice is by making their pedagogy situation adaptive because establishing personal connections to content is critical to students' overall L2 literacy development, especially when they are in the early stages (Langer, 1984).

The writing-focused activity included here is intended to help L2 writers “understand how written discourse is organized to communicate within genre and task expectations” (Grabe, 2003, p. 256). It is also meant to guide L2 writers, via appropriate scaffolds, to produce their response effectively by processing the meaning from what they read via their writing (Hedgcock & Ferris, 2009).

In order to expose our multilingual writers to a variety of language uses, traditional pedagogy and resources should be supplemented with text types that include real-life nuances in our curricula (Casanave, 2011), such as the sample essay for the activity included in this article. Taking such teaching initiatives, second language writing teachers can help students identify and understand the distinctions between academic and non-academic writings, which will further develop their social interactions within second language discourse. With this background in mind, the next section will explain the teaching artifact I designed to guide my students' understanding of the compare and contrast genre.

Activity description

Reading and writing go hand in hand (Grabe, 2009; Hedgcock & Ferris, 2009; Hudson, 2007). Therefore, this activity guides early multilingual writers to connect to what they are reading in the target language and to express their critical interpretation via writing. This activity begins by introducing students to a narrative essay to help them understand the conventions of the target genre via language scaffolds where students compare and/or contrast between the specific pieces of characters' life experiences in the literary text and their own lives.

Let's see how this activity as a whole looked in my classroom. First, students read the sample literary text, which included multiple characters to explore. After reading it, each student chose only one character from the literary text to explore further through a series of response questions provided by the instructor. Then, with the help of a Venn diagram, students briefly noted similarities and dissimilarities between themselves and their chosen character. This culminated in a mini writing activity that allowed the students to produce their thoughts in writing. A full description of the steps I took in my classroom and the rationale for each is as follows:

Step 1

Provide the students with the activity sheet (see Appendix) and the sample literary text.

[Teachers will provide the sample essay. The sample essay is a part of an essay collection, which is available at most large libraries in the U.S.]

Step 1 is reading the sample text. I used a short essay called “Five Students” from a collection of short essays titled, *The Fire Girl: Essays on India, America, and the In-Between* written by Sayantani Dasgupta (2016). I chose this specific piece for the activity because the content of this essay tends to resonate with immigrant students. The author grew up in Delhi, India, a multilingual society. In the early 2000s, she moved to the University of Idaho in the city of Moscow to do her MFA in Creative Writing. Moscow is in rural Idaho and is demographically dominated by White English speakers. In her essay, she writes about her five students (both multilingual and domestic students) whom she taught.

This essay was particularly effective with my student population because the register of the essay is informal and consists of no heavy theoretical content. Moreover, Dasgupta’s essay is personal and anecdotal, so readers connected to the voice of the writer. I believe my students also enjoyed it because they could easily find similarities and differences between the characters in Dasgupta’s essay and themselves.

There are two ways of doing Step 1. The first approach is to ask students to read the sample essay to get a general idea of it without worrying about the activity sheet (see Appendix). Once students develop a general sense of the text, then follow the attached activity sheet’s instructions. The second approach is to ask students to read the questions on the activity sheet before reading the sample essay. This approach helps students locate the answers faster in a sample text. Both ways are reliable and dependent on the proficiency level of the classroom. Teachers can be flexible by allowing multiple opportunities to read the text for this activity, depending on how much time they want their students to spend on the activity.

Step 2

After reading the essay, answer the following response questions in no more than 1-2 lines.

Response questions:

- *Which character do you find most interesting, and which character do you want to choose for compare/contrast?*
- *Why are you interested in that character?*
- *What are the most salient characteristics of that character?*
- *What are the positive and/or negative characteristics of this character?*

I would like to remind second language teachers that in using this teaching activity, the students were introduced to the concept of the compare and contrast essay by using a narrative essay. While reading the essay, my students identified one out of the five characters to compare and contrast themselves to. To help students move forward in the activity, I asked them to read all the characters’ portions because I wanted them to make a clear and informed choice of the character to whom they compared and contrasted themselves. The second reason why I asked my students to read the whole sample text was so that they could connect to the author’s experiences, try to

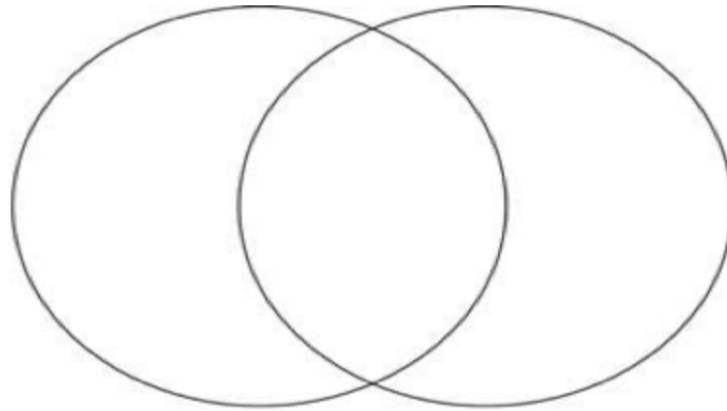
see themselves in it, and find echoes of their own experiences, authentic examples, and justifications.

Step 3

Fill in all the responses from Step 2 in the diagram below. The description of each response should only be in a few words.

Character

You



Similarities (Center Part)

Dissimilarities

Dissimilarities

Figure 1. Venn diagram to help students jot down specific similarities or dissimilarities between them and the chosen character in the sample text.

Once all of the students considered their chosen character in Step 3, the Venn diagram scaffolded the process by asking them to jot down the possible similarities or dissimilarities between the characters and themselves. At the end of this step, every student had a more precise representation of how they resonated with their chosen character and how they differed.

Step 4

Based on your information in the Venn diagram, write a short response (not more than 250 words) that compares and contrasts who the character is to who you are.

The activity in Step 4 is the final step where every student wrote about the similarities or dissimilarities between them and their chosen character with guidance from Step 2 (response questions) and Step 3 (Venn diagram). The activity required them to produce 250 words and exposed them to the process of the compare and contrast essay. However, this is not the essay they wrote for grading. This activity was just a way to help them think about the compare and contrast essay in a way that is meaningful to them. With this teaching artifact, my aim was to

introduce my students to the target genre. After this introductory lesson, I provided my students with the commonly used structures of academic language to prepare them to write a compare and contrast essay.

Following the above steps will help students hone second language writing skills and provide students the guided support while producing the target language at the early language development stage. Based on the foundation provided here, students are better prepared to adapt to the conventions of academic writing.

Discussion

This activity introduces students to the compare and contrast genre via a narrative essay and provides practice with essential reading strategies that allow them to better access the content of a text. Since my student population (both international and first or second-generation immigrant students) was new to the purposes of English language academic writing, I developed this activity to provide them with a set of tools including response questions, a Venn diagram, and mini writing, to understand the process of writing in this particular genre. These scaffolds, described above and represented on the activity sheet (see Appendix), help students understand the activity's expectations, what they need to do while working on it, and how to do it, even if they are new to this type of genre or activity.

As Casanave (2017) puts it, as knowledge facilitators, we often have limited time because of the specified duration and requirements of our courses, and because of this, writing teachers might have to limit themselves in terms of teaching the nuances of a particular kind of genre. Therefore, keeping what Casanave (2017) suggested into consideration, with the help of this artifact, I hope to increase the scope of the target genre by including formal and informal writing and develop a "staged goal-oriented social process" among my students as suggested by Rose and Martin (2012, p. 1) as well. Such teaching initiatives empower students to build better awareness, structural understanding, and working of a specific genre both inside and outside the classroom contexts.

It is crucial for us as teachers to understand that there is no one type of good writing. Instead, there is only contextually appropriate writing. What students (us too at many levels) generally learn in writing class typically has more of an inclination towards the academic nature of language usage because that is what second language writing courses usually demand. Still, we cannot ignore that our classrooms are not the only social space within which our students engage with the second language. Therefore, preparing our students to make relevant shifts within a genre is important because it includes the production of thought, and hence, writing (at least we hope). This kind of teaching approach helps develop L2 students' overall writing skills, as Ferris (2010) proposed by assisting them in growing as writers by moving across registers but yet within the context. Therefore, it would not be wrong to say that second language writing preparation should also invite writers to interact with both academic and non-academic writing.

A crucial decision I made while designing this artifact was to learn from Yang et al. (2015) that students might feel clueless or bogged down when, as teachers, we give them something to write about that they do not know. Agreeing with Yang and others, in my opinion and in my experience, this can increase students' Affective Filter (Krashen, 1982), broadening the gap between where they are and where they should be in terms of their language skill attainment.

Therefore, centering my students' personal experiences in this activity is one of the best ways to keep their interest in their literacy development. Since they can relate the context of the sample essay with themselves, this task helps them engage in the reading because they will continuously be comparing or contrasting the character who might have had the same (or not same) experiences as them. Frequent activities such as this can validate students' lived experiences and act as mediation for building further literacy skills. As a result, they develop an interest in writing, which is crucial to their progress as L2 writers.

Conclusion

I specifically chose Dasgupta's *Five Students* (2016) as the sample essay because it offers both the immigrant experience to which my students can relate and a narrative tone that teaches them to focus on understanding the craft of the targeted genre, especially when my students are at their early L2 literacy development stages. With this activity, L2 writers learn how to form their voice with the compare and contrast genre, understand the situation anecdotally, and refer to the evidence while comparing and contrasting with the characters in Dasgupta's essay.

Via this teaching material, I want to reiterate for the reader that our students' voices and experiences are invaluable assets for their second language development. This artifact attempts to let our students learn about the compare and contrast genre by helping them to analyze a narrative text with adequate support and to relate it to instances from their personal lives. While students are comparing or contrasting their lived experiences with the characters in Dasgupta's essay, they not only analyze an authentic text but also develop rhetorical stances of the genre. These learnings are crucial to success in U.S. educational and professional scenarios and help students be flexible across different social contexts and become contextually appropriate writers.

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Appendix

[Activity Sheet of How to Compare/Contrast using a Narrative Essay](#)

Author bio

Saurabh Anand is a doctoral student in the Department of Language and Literacy Education at the University of Georgia. In 2020, He earned his M.A. English (TESOL) from Minnesota State University, Mankato. He is the Communications Editor of the Journal of Language and Literacy Education, and in 2021, he received the 30 Under 30 honor by the International Literacy Association. He tweets at [@_saurabh_anand_](#)
contact: saurabh.anand@uga.edu

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